

My V&A **Barbara Hulanicki**

Born in Poland, Barbara Hulanicki was brought up in Palestine, settling with her family in Brighton after the war. She worked as a fashion illustrator for *Vogue* and *The Times*, before becoming a clothes designer in her early twenties when she and husband Stephen Fitz-Simon set up their own pioneering mail-order fashion label in the mid-1960s, targeting young women “who simply didn’t have anywhere they could buy nice modern clothes”. The idea took off when more than 17,000 readers bought a smock dress offered in the *Daily Mirror* (see page 16), and the couple decided to create an affordable shop “for our own generation”.

Founded in Kensington in 1964, Biba was an overnight sensation, the fashion hang out of swinging London’s in-crowd. It expanded into a bigger

home every two years, finally emerging as a fully fledged five-floor department store, complete with roof garden, when it relocated to the former Derry and Toms building in 1970.

When the store closed in 1976, Hulanicki reinvented herself as a successful interior designer, but never lost touch with the fashion world. In 2008 Top Shop commissioned her to create a new fashion range which sold out in days. She is currently working on twin Top Shop collections for Bad Girls and Good Girls, scheduled for launch this autumn.

To see Barbara Hulanicki choosing her V&A favourites and donating some Biba treasures to the museum, please go to www.vimeo.com/vamuseum



“I was incredibly drawn to historical art... I was redesigning the past into the present”



Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *The Day Dream*, 1880
Having come from a family that lived in the past, I was incredibly drawn to historical art – Art Nouveau and Pre-Raphaelite painting in particular. I was redesigning the past into the present. The whole look of this painting of William Morris’s wife very much epitomised the first Biba look: very pale skin, dark brown lips. I still love her! The Biba girl started like this. She moved on later, but this was a very strong influence.

Top right: Barbara Hulanicki. Photo: Dania Graibe. **Left: model Pauline Stone in a Barbara Hulanicki gingham dress for Biba, published in the *Daily Mirror*, 1964.** Photo: John French © V&A Images. **Right: Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *The Day Dream*, 1880** © V&A Images



Left: Biba floral trouser suit, 1970. Right: tiara comb, René Jules Lalique, 1903-1904. Both © V&A Images

Biba trouser suit, designed by Barbara Hulanicki, 1974
We always tried to wear Biba clothes if we went to trade shows, but one year I was in such a rush that I hadn’t realised what had been chosen for us until we got to the airport. To be honest, I was a bit horrified by the idea of three of us showing up in these trouser suits because they were so loud – all made out of a Sanderson floral furnishing fabric with large roses which had to be dry cleaned. The three of us were sitting in a compartment on the train from Milan to Bologna and people kept coming in and asking if we were film stars. I thought we looked more like a dance troupe!

Ethiopian processional cross, before 1868
As I child in Jerusalem there were no children’s games as such, so we spent a lot of time drawing. I was fascinated by the beauty and ornament of the churches of the Middle East. We spent all our weekends going around and looking at amazing Byzantine churches. I’m absolutely fascinated by Ethiopian crosses. They can be incredibly ornate, but this one is relatively simple.



René Lalique tiara comb, 1904
The whole Art Nouveau thing emerged because I was asked to do Art Nouveau illustrations for *The Times*. I was drawing in that style for ages, so I got into Alphonse Mucha drawings, which are very intricate and very decorative. This particular piece is so pretty, probably designed by Lalique for a girl’s coming out. It’s pinky and gorgeous.



Biba logo by Steve Thomas and Tim Whitmore
When Biba moved into the Derry and Toms building in 1970 we adopted a new logo that fitted its Art Deco character. Every floor had its own illustration. The pregnant mums had a big belly. We did categories we needed ourselves, so when our baby came we did a kiddy collection. I had to dress my baby somehow, and I didn’t want him in pale blue fluffy things from Harrods. I wanted him in black and purple, so the poor chap had to put up with wearing things in those colours.

Left: Ethiopian processional cross, seventeenth-eighteenth century © V&A Images. **Above: Biba brand identity – black and gold with Art Deco styling**